

The Salt Lake Tribune

State should encourage less driving

Salt Lake Tribune Editorial

Updated:04/14/2010 06:20:21 PM MDT

The Utah Department of Transportation plans to spend \$4 billion to expand and upgrade some of the major highways in northern Utah this summer. UDOT officials are warning motorists away from busy construction areas and recommending staggered work schedules, working from home and riding buses or trains. We think those are fine suggestions; they're so sensible, in fact, that if more people adopted them permanently we might not need ever more and bigger roads. And our air quality just might improve, too.

Such measures are unavoidable to get the road work done. But a larger exigency is the threat to health and longevity from the stew of pollutants vehicles produce. We should be in long-term emergency mode to solve that problem.

One of the largest and most costly projects is the Interstate 15 expansion through 24 miles of Utah County with a price tag of \$1.7 billion. The expectation is that, by adding at least two new lanes in each direction, plus auxiliary lanes between interchanges around Lehi, Provo-Orem and Springville, UDOT will relieve some very nasty congestion.

Surely such a project should make the ride through the county much quicker and smoother. But, considering how quickly the expanded I-15 through Davis County clogged back up, the project probably won't solve the problem for long.

The reality is that adding more roads and more freeway lanes encourages more drivers to drive more often and farther. Make it easier to drive and more people will do it. There is less incentive for employers to try telecommuting, and less motivation for motorists to carpool or use mass transit. More lanes simply feed the one-person, one-car mentality that keeps adding more pollutants to our already unhealthy air as the county adds 100,000 new residents.

UDOT uses education to encourage people to stay off the highways while crews are working. The same tactic, employed by state agencies and elected officials, might keep the converted off permanently. UDOT's Heather Barney says the goal is to reduce I-15 traffic by 20 percent in Utah County, and the agency will probably meet that goal by persuading motorists that driving less is in their own best interests. If UDOT can convince Utahns of that fact during a three-year construction project, why can't our governor, health department, legislators and other policy makers persuade drivers to make it an on-going practice?

Cleaning up the unhealthy air along the Wasatch Front is in everyone's best interests.